

Estonian Poetic Surrealism: Laaban and Ehin

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Preface

In the first *Manifeste du surréalisme*, in 1924, André Breton (2000: 24) wrote that there is a legend about Saint-Pol-Roux who used to have a notice posted on his manor door every evening before he went to sleep, which read: *LE POÈTE TRAVAILLE*.

And, inspired by the controversial poet Laurent Tailhade, who commented on a bombing in the Chamber of Deputies in 1893 with his famous words “*Qu’importe la victime si le geste est beau*”, André Breton fired in the *Deuxième Manifeste du surréalisme*, in 1929 (2000: 74): “L’acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu’on peut, dans la foule.”

The oxymoronic disposition ‘rioting serenity’, characteristic of the core of surrealism, serves as a point of departure for my article. It constitutes an exploration of Estonia’s two main surrealist poets, Ilmar Laaban – a linguistic rebel – and Andres Ehin – a pataphysical daydreamer. The main aim of this juxtaposition is to show how they converge in identity and difference.

Introduction

It seems to be a commonplace for many scholars (eg. Caws 2004, Duplessis 1995, Alquié 1977) to regard Surrealism as the most prominent avant-garde movement of the twentieth century. In the words of Katharine Conley and Pierre Taminiaux (2006: 1):

[i]ts artistic power arguably continues to be felt today in the realms of popular culture, film, photography, poetry, fiction, theater, advertising, politics, post-colonial productions, and theory. Never exclusively a literary or art movement, surrealism was a way of walking down the street, of engaging oneself in politics, of dreaming and living in the everyday. [...] Yet it was always a shared movement, both in terms of aesthetic practice and by ideology, and, as such,

there were always those whose work and ideas at times clashed with Breton's mainstream point of view.

This definitely holds true for Estonian Surrealism, too, especially when we consider the technique of automatic writing which was probably never fully achieved. Surrealism in Estonia can be seen as a quite sustainable method that remained influential from its inception in the 1940s through the 1960s, to the very present.

Background

Of course, the appropriation of Surrealism in Estonian literature has its implicit pre- and explicit post-history. At least seven different modes of expression can be detected.

First, there is a sense of folkloristic absurdity in many jokes, riddles, word plays, drinking songs, and mystic narratives about the supernatural metamorphoses. It does not come as much of a surprise that this method is not new. It was invented already a very long time ago. For example, the comical motive of a world turned upside down occurs in the so called "Miraculous Song". To quote several recordings of this song (q.v. *Eesti rahvalaulud*: type 1065; 249–250).

Oi

Oi imeta, oi imeta!

Ei ole näenud imeta,

härjad hauksid, koerad künsid,

lammas läks laudile munele,

kana tõi kaksi tallekesta,

hobu tõi halli vasika,

lehm tõi laugu täkukese.

Tüdrukud tegid regesid,

vanad naesed vankerida,

mehed metsassa magasid,

poisid putru poputasid.

Kilter kündis ja siga sundis,

koer käis, suapad jalas,

vasikas tantsis vaskses kingis!

Oh wonder, oh wonder!

A wonder never seen:

Oxen barked, dogs ploughed,

a sheep went onto the ceiling to lay eggs,

a hen gave birth to two lambs,

a horse brought a gray calf,

a cow a little blazed stallion.

Girls made sledges,

old women made wagons,

men slept in the woods,

boys puffed porridge.

A bailiff harvested, and a pig forced him,

a dog walked, boots on,

a calf danced in copper shoes!

Härg oli karjas, kamson seljas,	An ox was a shepherd, and wore a woolly,
kassil olid kannussed jalasse,	a cat had spurs on his feet,
parmul oli hää pannalvöö.	a horsefly had a good buckle belt.

Second, the influence of Freudism on Estonian mentality in the first half of the last century. It informed Laaban as a high-school student and a student of composition while he debuted with his first poems and articles at the end of the 1930s, and, subsequently, during the war. A first solid milestone of the discourse was a lengthy psychoanalytic essay on the folklore motives in our national epic *Kalevipoeg* by the writer Johannes Semper in 1924. Also his novel *Armukadedus* (Jealousy, 1934), which, alas, has not been paid much attention to. An atheist psychoanalytical journal *Ratsionalist* was founded and published in 1932–1933 by Max Laosson, a young Marxist. The budding Debora Vaarandi, later an officially engaged Soviet poet, translated a study by Alfred Adler *Menschenkenntnis*, in collaboration with her first husband the writer Aadu Hint, who was initially very fond of psychoanalysis in his fiction, too. Both psychoanalytical novels by a young philosopher Leo Anvelt, *Viirastusi valges öös* (The Delusions In the White Night, 1928) and *Eluhirm* (The Fear of Life, 1936), certainly deserve to be mentioned.

However, as I have shown elsewhere (Merilai 2009), the psychological novel by our prominent critical realist Eduard Vilde, *Mäeküla piimamees* (The Dairyman of Mäeküla, 1916) on the emancipation of women and peasants in general at the end of the colonial rule of the Baltic-German barons, was extremely well informed. Owing to the modern discourse of Freudian sexuality, it even includes minute details.

Third, it is obviously significant that Vilde was a firm socialist. All the above mentioned writers (except Anvelt) eventually identified ever more with the political left. As committed communists and even harsh Stalinists for a lengthy period during the Soviet occupation, they promoted the ESSR with sincere conviction. There must have been a specific mental magnetism between *la révolution surréaliste... et imperialiste*. No wonder, the mean communist *coup d'état*, cruel executions, mass deportations and terror, establishing kolkhozes and expropriation, blunt and violent propaganda, all this caused similar irrational effects in the soul of a society organized quite differently and peacefully – as did Surrealism with an audience unprepared for it. But Laaban, too, defined himself as a Trotskyite and a radical-democrat while already in exile in Stockholm, which, of course, provoked much irritation and assaults against his personality by his fellow refugees. No doubt that this caused him much emotional and

practical trouble. Nevertheless, as a cosmopolitan and fluent in all main European languages, which made him intellectually independent, he even seemed to enjoy the amusing buzz around him. In principle then, by definition, a surrealist artist must always *épater les bourgeois*.

Fourth, early Surrealist motives or similarities emerged in Estonian literature during the first half of the 20th century. First of all, prominent short story writers Jaan Oks, Friedebert Tuglas and August Gailit represented grotesque expressionism, as did intuitive magical realist and eco-critical writer Juhan Jaik, or the linguistically playful rural poet Hendrik Adamson.

These were the historical premises. As for impacts and metastases of the surrealist method, one can follow leads pointing towards the captivating language poetry of Artur Alliksaar or the work of the melancholic artist Arno Vihalemm in the 1960s, the playful Juhan Viiding, prone to tragicomic puns, and the rustic as much as politically sarcastic bard Hando Runnel in the 70s and 80s. Equally important in this contexts are the existentialist fiction of Karl Ristikivi, Bernard Kangro and Arvo Valton, irrational or philosophical drama by Mati Unt or Madis Kõiv, narratives by the sharp Vaino Vahing, dealing with psychiatric concerns. This list includes both domestic and exile authors; some of them still alive. During the regained independence, in turn, one should pay attention to the graphomaniac psychedelic *écriture* by the late Jüri Ehlevest or the kind fantasies by Mehis Heinsaar. One should also mention the sociopathic mockery by the cynical poet Kivisildnik who, by the way, also most effectively makes use of a surrealist 'cut-up technique', in which the lines of the quoted texts are rearranged in a cubist way to create a novel result with an absurd flavour. Or another polemical figure who enjoys much popularity – the feuilletonist and playwright Andrus Kivirähk with his sarcastic, sometimes even perverse notions of national mythology and social ideology. But also the young Kristiina Ehin herself should be mentioned. In her short stories and well-translated poems, the apple of her father's eye relies more and more on surreal absurdity enriching her integral feminist, ethnical and ecocritical approach.

Sixth and seventh, there are, of course, some other 'pure surrealist' poets, alongside Laaban, like his friend Ilmar Mikiver in Washington, a reporter of the broadcast "Voice of America"; or some contemporary followers like Jaan Malin (he is also the compiler of Laaban's posthumous works), Valdur Mikita, Erkki Luuk, Kiwa and some others who aim to challenge Laaban and Ehin with their linguistic fireworks.

Thus: many surreal tricks and features are often exploited today even if the works themselves are not always intended to follow a strictly conceived

definition of Surrealism. Still, if one needs a useful toolkit for phonetic or semantic games, for shifting reality into a fictional fairy tale, to apply a dream-work, to give a social phenomenon an absurd turn – surrealism comes in handy. Thanks to the key figure Ilmar Laaban, who most splendidly introduced it, the method is fully incorporated into Estonian postmodern pluralist culture, including literature, theatre, art, film, and advertisements.

Ilmar Laaban (1921–2000)

He has been often called the 'father of the Estonian Surrealism'. He even has some role in the founding of the Swedish counterpart movement. Laaban's mother was Latvian (like Kristian Jaak Peterson's, a linguistic genius who initiated Estonian high poetry at the beginning of the 19th century, or Ivar Ivask's, Laaban's contemporary in the USA, the former editor of the journal *Books Abroad / World Literature Today*). Laaban's family communicated mostly in German. So he developed a strong oral and narcissist fixation beneficial to an artist: he was fluent in German, French, English, Swedish... He studied composition and piano at the Tallinn Conservatory (he was fond of jazz and dodecaphony) and Romance languages at Tartu University. To avoid conscription into the German army, in 1943 he fled via Finland to Sweden and then completed his studies at Stockholm University.

He worked as a freelance critic, a lecturer, and became a prolific translator of avant-garde poetry; his translations from French and Swedish into Estonian have been published in the volume *Magneetiline jõgi* (Magnetic River, 2001). He collaborated with the magazine *Odyssé* in which Öyvind Fahlström published his manifesto on concrete poetry. In addition, he was involved with various French and Italian art magazines, Swedish radio, some universities in Europe and in the USA. In 1975, he joined the International Art Critics Association. Laaban's contacts with the French avant-gardists were of importance to Swedish experimental Fylkingen language group in which he was acclaimed as a text sound poetry composer. The collection of Laaban's work in Swedish – *Skrifter*, in 4 volumes – was published in 1988: *Om Poesi, Om Konst, Om Litteratur, Om Musik*.

Laaban debuted with some odd texts in 1938 in his homeland, but his first collections of experimental poems in Estonian, *Ankruketi lõpp on laulu algus* (The End of the Anchor Chain is the Beginning of Song, 1946), and his second book *Rroosi Selaviste* (1957) were published in Stockholm. *Ankruketi lõpp on laulu algus*, with its superior message under the title "To live free or die",

derives from the Bretonese main trend of powerful oxymora: "I am a black banner in monkey's hand I am a filthy dance of the mourning mother I am a mystic backbone of the snails" ("Autoportree").

Rroosi Selaviste (modelled after Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, of course), in turn, follows rather the potential work of humorous glossaries (anagrams, paragrams, spoonerisms, chiasmi, calembours) in the manner of the OULIPO movement, especially Michel Leiris. Some untranslatable quotes (Laaban 2004: 156–162) might serve as an example: "Rose Sellaway's Laundry: Ironic Ironing of Iron Curtains"; "La bombe des kobolds tombe dans la tombe bleu cobalt et la comble"; "Der Spiegel des Zaubers: ein sauberer Ziegel"; "Rättgråt färgar grottan i rätt grått."

Laaban's third collection in Estonian, *Oma luulet ja võõrast* (Poetry of My Own and of Others) was published in Tallinn only in 1990.

Throughout the Soviet period, Laaban's poetry was officially forbidden. However, Laaban's work, denied with disgust by Soviet censorship, spread the more rapidly in rewritten form. Many young students turned into copycats, among them Andres Ehin. Only as late as in 1988, while Estonia began to regain its independence, Laaban's work could be published and was openly appreciated in his homeland. Another book, *Marsyase nahk* (The Skin of Marsyas, 1997) was released, containing Laaban's critical essays. His collected poems were published posthumously, in 2004: *Sõnade sülemid, sülemite süsteemid* (The Swarms of Words, the Systems of Swarms).

After his paralysis and death it was discovered that Laaban had authored some five thousand palindromes and hundreds of anagrams in different languages, of which only a relatively small selection, *Palingarderomb* (2007) and *Eludrooge ego-ordule* (Life-drugs to Ego-order, 2008), have been published in Swedish and in Estonian: "Eisen, nenne drei Erden, nenne sie!"; "Dromedare höhnen höher: "Ade, Mord!" (Eherne Dromedare gerade morden Rehe)"; "Dû à traicas, ici? non ici! sac i "Artaud"; "Noter: "Bêle, vague feu, gave le Breton!" (Laaban 2008: 9, 10, 71). Both recent Estonian books are compiled by the poet Jaan Malin, the son of the surrealist painter Ilmar Malin. In 2003, a collection of Laaban's poetry appeared in Latvian translation. Besides a couple of examples in Swedish and English (q.v. Laaban 1999), there is also a small selection in French published on the Internet by Antoine Chalvin (q.v. www.lekti-ecriture.com).

Beginning with the 1960s, Laaban composed so-called Text Sound Compositions. This is a performative form which applies primarily the sonorous genotext of pre-semiotic *chora* (a notion used by Lacanian feminists like Julia Kristeva to represent the hypothetical milieu of unconsciousness, *élan vital*).

The lexical meaning of the phonetics, if there is any, or genotext, is secondary. In the stereophonic counterpoint, in ascending activity of the oral expression, the words and phrases are not always fully comprehensible; however, in one way or another, there still remains a semantic dimension.

Text Sound Poetry exists on the border of poetry, music and performance. Laaban, with his education in musical composition, was in an excellent position to create art using such an innovative genre. In these works – inspired by Dada 'poeting', Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters, the German Merz group – the "[p]rerecorded sound channels are often mixed with a live channel which is created during the actual performance. This gives the material a dual character, partly planned and partly improvised." And Laaban always performed his works himself, which varied, sometimes considerably, from one occasion to another (www.ubu.com). Some famous headings are: "Chien d'absolu", "Ciel inamputable", "Dès que les dès", "Manitou – toutou", "Eaux", "Stentorsstön", "I revolutionens snö", "Tre brev från den dove", "Partenza", "Vesi ise" (Water itself)...

According to Laaban:

Sound-poetry: a momentary, fragmentary attempt to recapture the unity between poetry and song that disappeared with the advent of the written word. [...] In sound-poetry the listener is brought closer to the actual moment of conception. For me it is also a new means of reducing conscious control of the poetic process, allowing spontaneous creativity more freedom, capturing material that floats up from the preconscious and subconscious – surrealism's richly fruitful ambition that is beset by so many obstacles when poetry is confined to the written word. (www.ubu.com).

Laaban's work can definitely be considered an accomplishment of the programme set by the Young Estonia movement a century ago, in 1905: *Let us be Estonians, but also become Europeans!* Most ironically, the poet Gustav Suits, who was the author of this famous slogan and the leader of the generation, once so boldly open to the world, was unable to recognise Laaban's successful effort in becoming a truly European avant-gardist. On the contrary, the old and embittered man despised his young opponent with all his heart. And so did many other cultural figures in exile, beginning with the poet couple Marie Under – Artur Adson. Should we call it an aesthetic hypocrisy or psychological bankruptcy or else, perhaps more politically motivated by the post-war aftermaths – the end of a cultural self-colonization?

Andres Ehin (1940–2011)

Ehin was a devoted apprentice of the linguistic magician Artur Alliksaar (1923–1966), a prolific poet with unrestrained eidetic fantasy. Mild in content but persistent in his bizarre picturesque method, he was a pataphysical surrealist *par excellence*, if only we could reduce the overestimated role of 'automatic writing' in the initial definition. As one of his translators, Harvey Lee Hix, put it (2006: 6), Ehin tried "[t]o trump the absurd language of the Soviet regime with a poetic absurdity" – quite a brave and definitely not a fully irrational project under the harassment of jealous censorship.

Ehin was born in Tallinn, studied Finno-Ugric philology at Tartu University, spent a short period among the Samoyedic people (Selqups) in Northern Siberia (1964–1965) and European Russia (1972), married the poet Ly Seppel, and worked as a cultural editor in Tallinn. Since 1974 he was active as a freelance writer, translator, and occasional performer of his own texts and sound poetry, both at home and eventually abroad.

Besides Carl Gustav Jung, Sigmund Freud, the whole discourse of Surrealism, the cultures of the Orient and the folklore of indigenous peoples, Ehin has found his inspiration in Acmeists, Imagists and Spanish Modernists. With his first book of poetry *Hunditamm* (Wolfe's Oak, 1968), but particularly with his shamanistic free verse collection *Uks lagendikul* (Door on an Opening, 1971), he established himself as the utmost spelling author of his time. The convincing breakthrough was elaborated by playful *Luba linnukesel väljas jaurata* (Let the Bird Babble Outside, 1977), *Vaimusõõrmed* (Mental Nostrils, 1978), *Tumedusi rüübatan* (Sipping the Darkness, 1988), *Teadvus on ussinahk* (Consciousness Is a Snakeskin, 1995), and a complex book of humorous fiction *Ajaviite peerud lähvad lausa lõkendama* (Chips of Entertainment into Flames, 1980).

To national acclaim, in 2000 Ehin reprinted the best of his poems in a large selection entitled *Alateadvus on alatasa purjus* (Subconsciousness Is Constantly Drunk). In the afterword to the volume, he noted (Ehin 2000: 499): "I do not consider myself a formalist. I prefer to record such states of mind and moods that can be expressed only in poetry. When a play becomes magic, it would not be formal any more. I believe in flashing thoughts, in occurring ideas, in illumination. I believe in inspiration."

Since then, two partly or fully original collections, *Paluteder ja mutrikorjaja* (Blackcock and Screw Nut Harvester, 2004) and *Udusulistaja* (Plumy Fog-babbler, 2008), have appeared. Also some smaller selections like *Igavik vannitoas* (Eternity in the Bathroom, 2010) or *Kuitund* (The If-Hour, 2010;

with a Japanese author Fujitomi Jasuo), as well as the haiku collection *Sitikas suudleb kuud* (A Chafer Kisses the Moon, 2008), both trilingual. Taimi Paves points out the similarity of two Oriental soulmates (2011: 25–26): “Fujitomi’s ancient wisdom clothed with Oriental ease and Ehin’s magic words creep deep into the reader’s soul and cause the state of mind that surpasses the language. The entire perceptible space is suddenly filled with laughter! There is an apt Japanese proverb: ‘When the Zen monk laughs, the world trembles.’”

As a translator, Ehin has been fond of Sufi mysticism, the Arabian Nights, Chukchi shaman-tales, Western (anglophone, German, Russian, French, Finnish, Latvian, Swedish) and Eastern (Georgian, Turkish, Uzbek, Chinese, Korean, Japanese) fiction, fairy tales, children literature and modernism. His favourite poets were Federico García Lorca, whose poems in Spanish he was particularly eager to recite by heart, and Yunus Emre.

Fortunately, Ehin was lucky enough to get himself quite well translated, at least into thirty four languages (English, Japanese, Georgian, Gaelic, Russian, French, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, German, Lithuanian, Latvian, Spanish, Portuguese, Slovak, Turkish, Macedonian, etc). However, he became especially acclaimed in Ireland where his collection *Moose Beetle Swallow* appeared in 2005, introduced by Patric Cotter, the formal leader of the writers in South-Ireland. It must be the common sense of absurdity, most probably, that fascinates Ehin’s readers on the Isle of Limerick, even to the extent that he was plagiarized there (after the translation which was published in *ELM: Estonian Literary Magazine* (2003: 24), and obviously considered peripheral) by a renowned poet before his book eventually exposed the embarrassing fact. The following is another version of the translation and of particular interest (Ehin 2005: 34).

Dog Apartment

Imagine an apartment made of dog
 three rooms of bark, a bathroom of snout
 the cold tap dribbles, the hot tap slobbers
 an apartment made of dog with floors
 which howl at ceiling lamps at night as if they were moons
 imagine an apartment made of dog
 which detests the very scent of cat
 an apartment made of dog
 whose sofa hairs bristle
 at the sprayings of even distant moggies.

(Translated by Patrick Cotter)

Alongside his poetry, Andres Ehin has published a couple of semi-realistic humorous fictions: *Seljatas sada meest* (She Floored A Hundred Men, 1998), a novel in letters on two mighty lady-wrestlers, and *Rummu Jüri mälestused* (The Memoirs of Rummu Jüri, 1996), about a legendary horse thief, a local Robin Hood; the latter was also made into a film. His bibliography contains also four scripts both for cinema and open-air theatre, an irrational play *Karske õhtu-poolik* (A Sober Afternoon, 1972) with two co-authors under the alias Lembit Vahak, as well as twenty radio-plays.

Like Laaban, Ehin explained his principles in an early essay “Kujund ja meeled” (*Image and the Senses*, 1966), claiming that ‘eidetic sensibility’ forms a basis for the creative writing. He asserts that the visual perception is able to preserve itself when the ostensive stimuli have already gone, thus becoming the source of inspiration and fantasy.

At the heart of his texts lie contradictory references to everyday reality, so the sensible meaning, although in constant tension, is never completely erased. Around the core of tangible imagery, very attentive and inventive, he spins all kind of different possible and impossible fantasy worlds on extended metaphors – the funny conceits. The notion is specifically characteristic of metaphysical or mystical poetry à la John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins, or the Estonian religious genius Uku Masing, as well as to the branch of Surrealism called Pataphysics. The latter is a pseudoscientific discipline launched by Alfred Jarry, a forerunner of Surrealism, best known for his absurdist play *Ubu Roi* (1896) – with *Merdre!* as its opening exclamation.

But a poem by Ehin may also spring up simply from a pleasure of linguistic pun, especially paragrammatic and catachrethic, untranslatable calembour, in the comical style of Leiris and Laaban. So he evokes mysterious absurdities, convincingly connecting unbelievable oxymoronic contrasts. However ambiguous and polyvalent his defamiliarizations may turn, under the colourful surface texture the defeating opposition against the official truths and petrified forms is frequently targeted. As it was already declared by a title of a poem of his mentor Alliksaar: “The most responsible is a game”.

Conclusion

André Breton concludes his novel *Nadia* (1928) with a bold maxim: “*La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas.*” Breton, later, in his essay “La beauté sera convulsive” (1934), elaborates on this basic disparity presenting a photograph by Man Ray of a dancer caught up in her whirling skirts. This gave rise to the

surrealist fundamental schizophrenic idea of '*explosante-fixe*' (exploding-fixed; compulsive beauty): the ideal which must be at once unimaginable and absolutely plausible. As Mary Ann Caws puts it (2004: 24):

The *explosante-fixe*, an object which is both stabilized and exploding in energy; the *erotique-voilée*, the clue to perception both heavily eroticized and somehow veiled over; and the *magique circonctancielle*, the happenstance that in the essential attentiveness or state of expectation turns out to be magically significant – these three tenets are in evidence everywhere and are at the heart of the surrealist notion of lyric behaviour.



Man Ray. *Explosante fixe* (1934): <http://www.manray-photo.com>

Ilmar Laaban fits the definition best as he personifies the same choleric, contradictory, but subtle character. He is indeed hot-blooded, splendid, most attractive: sparkingly electrical, but intellectually checking; sensually aroused, but still delicate; always paranoically alert to the unusual signals in the middle of everyday triviality.

Andres Ehin, apparently, is not as perfect a match to the initial role model due to his more soft, pataphysically plotting and narrating, still traceable and less expressionistic imagery. While Laaban is sharp and cutting, urban cosmopolitan, Ehin, on the contrary, is suburban with his relatively moderate

temper once typical to peasantry. His style is sanguine, sometimes phlegmatic, which makes him less compulsive and instantly eruptive: more likely *magique-fixe*, as one may put it – a friendly but cunning sorcerer. Ehin himself (in a radio broadcast) came close to confirming this: if automatism implies a shift external to a system, peculiar to Surrealism, then a pataphysical shift works within a system, presupposing a perhaps less 'violent' ontology and gnosis.

Laaban and Ehin invite us to see them as modern incarnations of the boreal shamans who could explore the parallel universes created mostly by themselves. From this point of view they embody the sympathetic runo wizards in *Kalevala*, Ilmarinen and Väinämöinen, the Finno-Ugric archetypal cultural heroes. Thus, in many ways, Laaban's and Ehin's work is solidly grounded in tradition, and embodies a national contribution to an important phenomenon in world literature.

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